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The Joseph Saga

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Genesis 37

Joseph bar Jacob, meaning Joseph, son of Jacob, or Joseph and the coat of many colors, or Joseph and the amazing technicolor dreamcoat, if you will. If you want to look him up in Wikipedia, Joseph of the Bible is the best way. I wish I was known like that. Wouldn't you like to be known by that, Bill or Sally of the Bible? Joseph of the Bible. Joseph of the Old Testament.

The first story after his birth we hear of Joseph is of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was one of the younger brothers, and Jacob said that he loved Joseph more than any of his sons. That's a good idea, isn't it, to tell everybody that? (Laughter) You might as well just paint a big target on the back of Joseph's coat of many colors. Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons. Joseph was one of 12 brothers from different mothers, four different mothers. They were a blended family. So they were brothers some days and half brothers other days.

Joseph was put in charge of overseeing his brothers as they cared for the flocks. Joseph also loved to give bad reports on his brothers. As I said, I was the youngest, and I loved to give bad reports on my sisters. When it came to television watching, if I didn't like what they were watching, I would go up and change the channel. Then they would hit me or push me, and I would cry, my parents would come in, send them to their room, and I could watch whatever I wanted to watch. Worked like a charm almost every time. I loved to give bad reports on my older sisters.

One day Joseph is sent out to check on his brothers tending to the flocks, and the brothers had had it up to here (Pastor Allan motions next to his neck). In fact, Joseph was also a dreamer and loved to talk about his dreams. He told his brothers that he once had a dream where all of them, all 12 of them, had gathered wheat together and gathered them in stocks standing in the field, and then 11 stalks of wheat gathered around his stock and 11 bowed down to his stock of wheat. So the brothers had had it up to here (Pastor Allan motions to the top of his head) with Joseph. Then Joseph had another dream, and he told his mother and his father and his brothers. He said, I had a dream that the sun and the moon and 11 stars bowed down and worshipped me. Jacob's father pulled him aside and said, you know, Joseph, you have these dreams, but it's really best not to speak of these things. So the brothers had had it up to here (Pastor Allan motions above his head) with Joseph.

So when Joseph came out, they had plotted to kill Joseph, to kill their half brother, Joseph. When they got a hold of him, Reuben the oldest brother said, wait a minute, let's not have the murder, this blood, on our hands -- maybe, perhaps, remembering the story of two other brothers, Cain and Abel. Let's not have the murder, this blood, on our hands. Let's just throw him into the cistern, this empty well, in the desert. Surely he'll die, but it won't be blamed on us. Maybe

Reuben was studying to be an attorney, I don't know, but maybe there was a loophole somewhere.

So they threw him into this cistern after they had taken off his coat of many colors, a coat that they had hated so much. It was rare in those days to have a coat of color let alone a coat of different colors. Different colored cloths cost money. Different colors of the dye cost money, and here he had all the colors, and they had the shepherd's robe only. So they took this coat off of him and they threw him in the well.

Now, actually, Reuben was plotting, but he was plotting to come back later and rescue Joseph from the well. We don't know if his intentions were good or maybe he thought, well, my dad loves him the most, and if I save him, maybe he will love me second; trying to work his way up the corporate ladder there.

The brothers dispersed back to the flocks, and some of them sat down to eat dinner there in the twilight. I don't know if they heard Joseph screaming from the well, calling out their names, while they sat for dinner, or maybe Joseph was quiet at the bottom of the dry well. But there they sat for dinner. Then they saw a caravan coming through the land, as was the case many a day, and Judah said, wait a minute. Why don't we make something out of this for ourselves? Instead of just letting our brother die, why don't we sell him into slavery? See, Judah was studying to be a banker. They said, well, that sounds like a good idea.

So they lifted Joseph out of the well, and they sold him to the caravan coming by for 20 pieces of silver, sold him into slavery. So later when Reuben came by, he tried to find Joseph in the well, and he wasn't there. He went to his other brothers and he said, where is he? Where is the boy? He is not in the well. Where is the boy? They said, we sold him into slavery. And then they all paused. What are we going to tell dad? Isn't it great how you always think of that last, you know? After you really do something bad, or in your mind good, you think what are you going to tell dad? So one of them says, we'll take his coat that we have, and we'll rip it a little bit, and then we'll kill a goat and take the blood of the goat and splatter it all over the coat. It will have more color than it has ever had, and we'll show it to our father. So that's what they did; one sin leading to the next very quickly.

They took the blood of the goat and they spread it on the coat, and they brought this to their father and said, look, this is all we have found -- not really lying. They did find the coat, they just found it on their brother before they ripped it off and threw him in the well and then sold him into slavery. They didn't want to tell the whole story. They didn't have that much time. Look, this is all we found. Jacob looked at the coat and assumed that his son was consumed by a wild animal. He thought that on his journey to his brothers, a wild animal had fallen upon him and killed him.

Jacob took off his clothes and tore them, and he put on rough burlap, and he sat in mourning and wept and wept for a long, long time. Everyone tried to

console him, but he said, I will not be consoled. I will weep for Joseph, my son, even when I am in my old age.

How do families get to this point? I am always surprised at the frailty of families. The love of family is one of the most beautiful things in the world, but like so many beautiful things, it's also so fragile sometimes. These are the people that we love the most, and these are the people that we hate the most. These are the people that we love to enjoy their company, and these are the people that get on our last nerve all the time. The most beautiful and most precious and most wonderful things in life are sometimes the most fragile. How did they get to this point?

Clearly, Jacob saying he loved Joseph more than any of the other ones, well, that was a spark, or at least a whole match lit right to this fire, wasn't it? And then Joseph telling his dreams didn't help whatsoever. Why would Jacob love Joseph more than the other sons? He said that Joseph was the son of his old age. But Joseph was also one of two sons born to Rachel, the love of Jacob's life. When Jacob was young, he saw Rachel, a shepherdess. Even in that job of tending sheep he saw her beauty. He went to her father and said, can I have her hand in marriage? And he said to him, if you work for me seven years, I will give you Rachel's hand in marriage. Jacob said yes. I mean, we're talking love here, right? A lot of us would say, well, there are other fish in the sea. Seven years, that's a long time. He said yes.

After he had worked seven years, the father pulled the old bait and switch on him and gave him the older sister, Leah, in marriage, not Rachel. When Jacob went back, the father said, how could I let the younger daughter marry before the older? If you would like to have the hand of Rachel as well, all you have to do is work for me another seven years. Jacob said yes. We're talking love here. 14 years. And he married Rachel. And Rachel for most of her life was barren and did not bear children to Jacob. But when she was older, finally, she bore Joseph and then Benjamin. At the birth of Benjamin, Rachel died in childbirth, and they buried her south of Bethlehem on the road. So maybe why Jacob loved Joseph so much was that it came from his love of Rachel, who he had waited 14 years for. For the Rachel that he mourned for even to this day, the Rachel that he could not see except in these two sons. You see, in our relationships, we carry all of our other baggage into them, and sometimes we end up where Joseph and his brothers end up: selling their half brother into slavery that day.

But the scripture, as interesting as the story is, goes on, for listen to these words about Joseph. This caravan went down into Egypt with Joseph and sold him there to his new master. As it turned out, God was with Joseph. Are you hearing that? "As it turned out, God was with Joseph, and things went very well with him." That doesn't make sense, does it? If God was with Joseph, why on earth was he at the bottom of the well or sold into slavery or now working for a foreigner in a foreign country? Why was his father in ashes and sackcloth weeping and mourning for a son who wasn't dead? Why did the brothers turn on him?

"As it turned out, God was with Joseph, and things went very well with him." In fact, it gets even crazier. It says, "He ended up living in the home of his Egyptian master. His master recognized that God was with Joseph, saw that God was working for good in everything Joseph did. He became very fond of Joseph and made him his personal aide. He put him in charge of all his personal affairs, turning everything over to Joseph. From that moment on, God blessed the home of the Egyptian all because of Joseph. The blessing of God spread over everything he owned at home and in the field, and all Potiphar had to concern himself with was eating three meals a day."

Now, this challenges our whole concept of God being with us, doesn't it? It challenges our whole concept of what blessing is. What do we think it means for God to be with us? We basically think it means that everything is going to be okay, right? Isn't that most of our prayers for ourselves, for our family, for others; that God will be with us and everything will be okay? That we won't be sold into slavery, our family won't turn against us, we won't end up in a foreign country, and we won't be working for some other master. None of those would really be in our prayers when we thought we were asking for God to be with us.

As it turned out -- I love that phrase, as it turned out -- because no one would have expected it, right? As it turned out, God was with Joseph, and things went very well for him. What are they? Crazy? If this is going well, I would hate to see it going bad, right? As it turned out, God was with Joseph. Then it gets crazier because the blessing of God falls upon this foreign home. The blessing of God falls upon who Joseph is working for; that he noticed that God was with Joseph. A foreigner, a master, an owner of a slave, noticed that God was with Joseph and put his whole household, his whole life, his whole wealth in Joseph's hands.

What does that tell us about Joseph? That tells us that he was not bitter, right? Would someone turn his whole household over to someone that every time you talked to him said, you don't know how bad it is with me? My brothers sold me into slavery. You should have seen, before that, they threw me down a well. That every time you asked him to do something, he said, oh my, you don't know how bad it is. My brothers sold me into slavery. You're not going to turn your wealth over to that person, are you? Would you turn it over to a person that every time you asked him to do something, would say, I don't care about that, but one day, one day in the future, I am going to get back at my brothers? Would you turn it over to somebody that was completely living in the past just dwelling on this hurt, this wrong that was done to them? Would you turn your wealth over to someone that cannot think about the present, could only think about the future, when he was going to get even with those guys? No. He saw that God was with Joseph.

Joseph somehow, even after everything that was done to him, had the ability to live in the present. That is so hard for us. We either live in the hurt or what was done wrong to us in the past, or we live in the hope that something will be done right to us in the future. It is so hard to live right in the moment that God gives

us each day. Sometimes all we can do is the next right thing. We can't look at the big picture, we can't worry about the past, we can't see the future; all we can do is the next right thing. That somehow as Joseph lived in this foreign land, that he had the ability to live in that moment and do the next right thing. And Potiphar, his master, saw him do that with little so that he gave him more and more, that Joseph could do the next right thing right in the moment.

As it turned out, God was with Joseph, and things went very well for him. Sometimes all we can do in life is just the next right thing. Amen.